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ABSTRACT

Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP (Associated Press) style errors are among the factors that are hurting media credibility in the eyes of the public. Some have said that journalism schools share the blame for sloppy grammar because they do not prepare students. A survey of 100 randomly selected journalism schools and examination of their syllabi found plenty of awareness that spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style are important. The standards of instruction and assessment, however, varied widely, suggesting the need for a new, consistently high standard for teaching grammar in all J-schools. Improvements should aim for a clear, uniformly high standard for instruction and assessment. Future research is recommended. (Author/NKA)

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Assessing the Need for Change: A Survey of Grammar Curricula in American J-Schools

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Spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style errors are among the factors that are hurting media credibility in the public's eyes. Some have said J-schools share the blame for sloppy grammar because they don't properly prepare students. This survey of 100 J-schools and examination of their syllabi found plenty of awareness that spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style are important. However, the standards of instruction and assessment varied widely, suggesting the need for a new, consistently high standard for teaching grammar in all J-schools. Improvements and future research are recommended.

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Introduction

No one is perfect, and occasional grammar mistakes will sneak their way into everyone's writing. But the literature indicates that the more grammar mistakes news consumers find, the more their faith in the media is eroded. There is more than bad grammar to blame for failing media credibility, and this research is not intended to examine all of the media's problems. Instead, it explores just one aspect of the many that affect media credibility: correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style. Specifically, it asks what J-schools are doing to produce capable grammarians for the newsroom.

Literature Review

"Each misspelled word, bad apostrophe, garbled grammatical construction, weird cutline and mislabeled map erodes public confidence in a newspaper's ability to get anything right" (Urban, 1998, p.8). That statement does much to explain the results of a landmark report on journalism credibility by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. It also sets the stage to examine one aspect of what J-schools are doing to prepare journalists.

There is an increasing body of evidence to suggest that media credibility is falling in the public's eyes (Pew, 1999). Research by the Pew Center for the People and the Press examining national, local, and Internet media outlets showed several levels of introspection among the media. Error-filled reporting, including grammatical mistakes, was among the self-disclosed flaws the media cited (Pew, 1999).

- Do they have journalism degrees, or did they just get out of kindergarten?
- They used to proofread. I don't know what they do now.
- Every time I pick it up, (I see mistakes).
- It seems the paper's gotten sloppier in the last 10 years.

These are some of the comments media practitioners made as part of the ASNE report. The ASNE study also revealed that 21 percent of the public and 37 percent of reporters and editors said they see grammar, spelling, or punctuation mistakes every day. Carelessness, inexperience, and a lack of knowledge were listed together as one of three main causes of grammar mistakes (Urban, 1998). Even before the ASNE study, editors were warning that basic writing skills were becoming a lost art— in part because J-schools weren't teaching them (Peterson, 1996). Editors complain that journalism graduates lack the quality writing skills they are looking for. They expect graduates who have just spent four years earning a journalism degree to have had a lot of experience perfecting grammar, spelling, punctuation, and AP style (Kees, 1996).

However, a Roper Center survey of 1,000 newly graduated J-school students found that 37 percent of them said their major was not focused on preparing them to become journalists. (Kees, 1996). It's not that J-schools haven't been looking at ways to improve curricula. They have, but much of the discussion and debate has centered around multi-cultural awareness, minority or race issues, balancing graduate and undergraduate programs, the teaching duties of graduate students, and keeping up with the technology of new media. These are valid concerns, but in the rush to engage new issues, J-schools may be neglecting a much older objective— grammatical precision.

Among the research addressing J-school curricula, a two-year study first published in 1984 by the University of Oregon took a panoramic view of journalism and mass communication programs with an eye toward assessing strengths and weaknesses. Early in the Oregon report, as it is called, the authors conceded that, "The general state of journalism and mass communication

education is dismal" (Oregon, 1987, p.iii). In its discussion of what should be included in a model curriculum, the Oregon report indicated strong agreement among college officials that proper grammar and use of the language are universally important. The Oregon report listed "competence in the use of the language" first among five elements of communication competency in a model curriculum (Oregon, 1987, p.51).

The Oregon report quoted John B. Adams, former University of North Carolina dean, as saying the need for remedial grammar in J-schools was "shameful." His assertion meant that students already should have good grammar skills when they arrive (Oregon, 1987). However, many do not. Sanders said that general college curricula are producing "functional illiterates" and that book publishers are responding with dumbed-down texts so that students can understand (Sanders, 1982).

In their conclusions, the authors of the Oregon report asserted that journalism majors should be "expected and required to be literate and competent in their use of the English language" (Oregon, 1987, p.56). They go on to call for "specific goals and outcomes with regard to professional competencies and skills" (Oregon, 1987, p.58). The Oregon authors' recommendations of high standards for grammar and usage proficiency coupled with uniform assessment through precise instructional goals and objectives dovetail with what editors and the public have said they want too.

In 1992, about 28 percent of 271 institutions sampled said they had adopted competency tests to ensure mastery of essential skills. (Dickson & Sellmeyer, 1992). In a 1997 Delphi study exploring "perceptions of quality in journalism and communication education," 53 faculty members, students, and media practitioners agreed that good writing and editing skills were the

most important instructional elements for J-schools to provide. In a Delphi item stating, "A high-quality major or minor in journalism or mass communication should require the following core classes or content areas for students," more participants selected "classes in writing/editing/information gathering" than selected any of 11 other choices, including theory, law, ethics, journalism history, computers/technology, research, math, or English (Smith, 1997).

What are J-schools doing today? Do they require the competency tests that the Oregon report recommended and Dickson and Sellmeyer investigated? Are they requiring the high standards of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and AP style that editors and readers say are missing from newsrooms today? Smith said more research is needed into the emphasis J-schools are placing on elements identified as important— especially as they appear in course outcomes.

"Another approach that could be used to obtain information about quality in journalism and communication education would be to evaluate quality as an outcome of educational programs.... Future studies to measure the equality of programs' outcomes could also examine the methods that are used in educational quality assessment" (Smith, 1997, p.40).

To that end, the following research questions were posed regarding the prominence, emphasis, and quality of writing and editing skills in J-schools:

1) Do J-schools treat spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style as important factors in improving the state of journalism?
2) How are J-schools teaching and assessing spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style?
3) Are J-schools using entrance or exit tests of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style competency?

Method

One hundred colleges and universities were selected randomly from a list of all American schools represented at the 1999 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass

Communication national convention in New Orleans. A mail questionnaire was sent to the journalism or mass communication department at each university. The questionnaire included items asking whether the department uses a grammar competency exam as an entrance or exit test, whether the department has a universal policy for grammar grading in all classes, and whether students are required to take a course in grammar and editing. The respondents also were asked to report the grading criteria for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style errors in the above-referenced class as well as how those criteria are extended to other classes in the program. Finally, if an editing or media-writing class was required, a copy of the syllabus was requested. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the course and curriculum questions, including Likert-scale responses addressing the extent to which the grading criteria of the media-writing course were enforced in other classes in the program. The syllabi submitted from media-writing courses were compared in depth to reveal how various J-schools across America are teaching spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style.

Results/Discussion

Of 100 J-schools contacted, 65 returned surveys. Of those responding, 39 percent said they test the grammar competencies of incoming students, with two-thirds of that number requiring students to pass the test before they are admitted to the program. This result suggests an increase from the 28 percent Dickson and Sellmeyer found in 1992. Fewer schools— 11 percent— reported using exit tests to assess the spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style competencies of graduating students. About 35 percent of responding J-schools reported having a department-wide policy for the uniform enforcement of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style rules in all department courses. Most J-schools— 73 percent of those responding— said

that their students must take at least one editing or media-writing course that focuses primarily on spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style. Fully 85 percent of schools that require such a course have made it a prerequisite for other classes in their programs. Those schools also reported that the grading standards they had set for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style errors in the editing class were strongly enforced in other courses throughout the department. To measure that assertion, respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale, the extent to which the editing-class standards are enforced in other classes. The means of the responses were 6.4, 6.4, 6.5, and 6.0 for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style, respectively.

However, the surveys and supporting materials collected in this study revealed a factor that casts doubt on the value of extending the editing-class standards to other courses in the department. Specifically, the course syllabi showed that the teaching and grading standards set in the editing classes varied greatly. For example, the grading criteria listed by at least two of the J-schools indicated that students could misspell two words and still get an "A" on a writing assignment. Several other J-schools would return an automatic "F" for the same two spelling errors on a writing assignment.

The various syllabi returned with the survey showed a wide disparity in the way J-schools teach and assess spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style. Generally, the various approaches can be grouped into one of two categories— those that attempt to apply an objective, systematic standard and others that are more subjective in assessing the need for editing.

Those with a fixed grading scheme listed set deductions of two, three, five, or 10 points for factual errors, misspellings, grammar, punctuation, style, or other "unclear" errors, including incorrect edits. For instance, if a writing assignment contained a run-on sentence, a pronoun in

the wrong case, and a sentence with a tense shift, the standard deductions could be tallied, and a grade could be assigned. Often, these set deductions punished misspelled names more severely that other misspellings, with many issuing automatic "C" or "F" grades for that offense. Several schools used these kinds of set scales, but the scoring standards varied greatly.

Another group of J-schools didn't apply set deductions for each error. Instead, these schools' grading scales rated the overall suitability of the product, awarding "A" grades to articles that could be published "as is" or with only minimal revisions. For the most part, these subjective rating systems awarded "C" grades to papers that were salvageable but "missed the lead," "needed rewriting," were "flawed" or "vague," or contained "some" grammatical errors. One professor described papers of this type as ones that most people wouldn't read unless they had to.

"D" and "F" grades were reserved for papers that could not be edited into a usable form. These papers needed complete rewriting. They lacked news judgment, completely missed the point, and contained "multiple" or "numerous" grammar errors. Several of these subjective grading schemes seemed rather loose, especially when the syllabi that described them contained errors of their own. These kinds of mistakes cast serious doubt on the thoroughness of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style teaching and grading at many J-schools. However, there is even stronger evidence that some classes may not be setting sufficient standards for students.

As mentioned, some J-schools would award "A" grades for work that would be failed in others. Most of the differences among the grading systems described in the syllabi were not as extreme as that example, but plenty of disparity existed to suggest that some professors are not grading seriously enough. One class syllabus from a journalistic-writing course at a state

university indicated that students must score 65 percent on each of three grammar tests to keep from having their final grade lowered one letter. Many grading scales regard 65 percent as an "F." Is that really acceptable performance from journalism students on a grammar test?

As for the question of whether grading should follow objective, standard deductions or a more subjective scheme, the best answer seemed to be found in those syllabi that described using both. Using this dual-grading method, two grades are assigned for each writing assignment. One grade can focus on grammar, and follow a set scale of deductions for errors. The other grade can assess the quality of the writing, considering such factors as news judgment, balance, conciseness, readability, flair, and a myriad of other qualitative factors. The two grades are weighted so that good writing can be rewarded, while solid grammar remains essential for every paper.

At Michigan State University, the syllabus for J-200— a mandatory course for all journalism majors— details a grading schema in which grammatical precision can be emphasized without ignoring qualitative elements such as good news judgment and writing. The subjective evaluation is based on a 4.0 grading scale. A 4.0 story is one that could be published virtually as is. A 3.5 story could be published with some revisions. A 3.0 story is better-than-average. A 2.5 story is a little-above-average. A 2.0 story is an average job. A 1.5 story is weak. A 1.0 story is poor. And a zero is for late or unacceptable work. Distinctions along the scale are made based on how well the story is organized, written, and polished.

In addition to the subjective evaluation, papers in J-200 are graded using an objective measure of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style:

> A major factual error, such as misspelling a name, a misquote or an

> error that changes the meaning of a story will automatically result in a deduction of 3.0, allowing a maximum grade of 1.0 for a story. ...Three AP style errors will be allowed without penalty in each assignment. Beginning with the fourth such error, .25 will be deducted for each mistake. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, typos and biased language are unacceptable. Each such error will result in a deduction of .25 unless it is a repetition of the same error.

The data collected for this research indicated that three-fourths of the J-schools surveyed required a course in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style. The respondents said that the standards set in that class frequently were extended to other classes in their departments, indicating plenty of awareness that spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style are important issues for journalists today. Therefore, it seems that J-school faculty and administrators are aware that spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style are important, but they lack uniform, high-quality standards for instruction and assessment.

This research also indicated an apparent continued increase in the use of entrance tests of grammar competence. Some of the syllabi showed how these competency checks can be used to foster higher, more-uniform standards for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style skills. For J-schools interested in adopting entrance or exit tests, a seemingly good model can be found at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. The test is called the Grammar Proficiency Exam, and is detailed in the syllabus for J105:

> The School of Journalism requires all J105 students to pass a grammar proficiency examination with a score of at least 80 percent before receiving a grade for the course. The exam will be from 5-6 p.m. Feb. 17 in Fisher and Neff auditoriums.
>
> Review sessions and a retake exam will be arranged for those who do not pass the first grammar exam. The retake for W99 is 5-6 p.m. March 3. Students who do not pass the exam by the end of the semester will receive an Incomplete grade for J105. They

> will not be able to take any course for which J105 is a prerequisite until they pass the grammar exam, nor will they be admitted to the School. The exam is offered at least twice each semester.

Ball State University is another J-School that places a premium on grammatical precision. The school says so in a writing statement and then backs up its words with a entrance test to assess the skills of incoming students. Ball State's "Journalism Department Writing Statement" indicates that the J-school regards "writing performance and language usage proficiency as essential for all journalism courses."

At New Mexico State University, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication is pursuing what it perceives as a shortcoming in grammar instruction. In the syllabus for J-210, a statement of purpose indicates:

> The faculty ... believes that students should receive vigorous training in language skills and writing as part of their professional training. Journalism 210 is designed to provide such an experience. It is intended partly to halt the problem of students entering advanced courses in the department without sufficient writing and language skills. As a group, the faculty selected print news writing as the most appropriate vehicle toward achieving such goals. This course is in a laboratory setting. Grades are based exclusively on in-class writing assignments.

Another model for high-quality instruction can be found in Ohio University's J133 class, titled Precision Language. Instructors wishing to improve their editing or media-writing courses could find some helpful direction in the J133 syllabus. The class is a prerequisite for virtually all other courses in the program. J133 includes tests, spelling tests, writing assignments, and a portfolio-like system in which students collect media samples and offer them as examples of what's right and wrong with journalistic writing today. The class uses entrance and exit tests to

assess progress, and makes use of its own text, titled "The Incomplete Precision Language Handbook." The course is explained in the syllabus:

> The true purpose of the course is to help you gain a much broader background in and enjoyment of reasoned (not memorized) grammar, syntax, spelling by rules (and some memory for exceptions thereto), well-placed punctuation and precise usage. Many people lack confidence in their language skills because their backgrounds are so poor. Here is a chance for you to immerse yourself totally and to gain a good foundation or improve the foundation in the tools of your profession. No matter what your future profession will be, language will be one of its primary tools.

The J-200 course at MSU also engenders high standards. It requires sophomore standing and a passing grade on a language proficiency test for admission. After they're admitted, students discover a course that demands professional proficiency applied to realistic projects. Students are assessed using a combination objective/subjective grading schema. The syllabus begins:

> Your instructor will teach you to write accurately, concisely, and clearly in vigorous, grammatically correct English. You will be expected to learn and use AP style. ...Think of this course as your first job in the news business. The lab is a working newsroom with high professional standards. Your instructor is your editor (or news director), and you're the rookie. Your instructor has much to teach, and you have much to learn. As in most jobs, your work ethic, to a great extent, will determine how well you do....

Rutgers is another university whose J-school is taking a serious stand on teaching grammar. The syllabus for news writing at Rutgers indicates that "deadlines, spellings, grammar, punctuation and syntax are all taken seriously in journalism." The syllabus continues:

> Newsroom standards will be observed, given that the course tests your commitment to and interest in professional journalism. Therefore, all assignments (and, because this is a writing class, there will be many assignments) must be typed using newsroom conventions, as discussed in class. The course assumes basic

> mastery of standard English. Errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, diction, and usage will undermine your credibility in the class, just as they would undermine your credibility in a newsroom. Advanced copy editing is emphasized in another course; nonetheless, even here you must proof all assignments and correct errors. Misspelled proper names are unacceptable.

Conclusion

The survey data indicated awareness that grammar is an important issue for journalists and their credibility. It appears that more J-schools than ever are using entrance tests of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style competence, and most J-schools require at least one class grounded in these competencies. However, course syllabi indicated that instruction and assessment standards varied greatly from school to school. Some schools operationalize spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style at such low standards that their programs seem to be offering little more than lip service to these competencies.

When a J-school graduate enters the newsroom, there should be no uncertainty about whether he or she is prepared to apply spelling, grammar, punctuation, and AP style with professional proficiency. Because it is more difficult to proofread copy in the newsroom than it is in the classroom, students should over-learn these skills until they are automatic, allowing mistakes to be corrected as they are made— or avoided altogether. J-schools can never equip their graduates with the news-gathering and writing experience they will acquire after years of work as reporters, but they can prepare them with the grammatical foundation they will need to move ahead, write well, and earn respect as journalists. What is needed is not more dialogue about the importance of grammatical precision and its influence on journalists' credibility, but rather a clear, uniformly high standard for instruction and assessment of spelling, punctuation,

grammar, and AP style.

So what should this uniform standard be, and who should set it? Simply put, it should be better than the status quo. To find out what the current standards are, researchers should turn to content analyses of representative media samples for a baseline.

This research suggests that leaving the decision of setting the standard to individual professors has not worked, and probably would not work in the future. It also would seem unlikely that the academic community could reach a consensus on any standard set according to one person or panel's belief or judgment. Therefore, the decision should be logically derived from facts already present in the literature or from those obtained in future research.

The literature indicates that the media are not meeting a sufficient standard for grammatical correctness. Opinion polls of both the public and the media reveal this dissatisfaction. J-schools, therefore, should be insisting on a standard considerably higher than the one the media now use. Future research should measure the frequency and type of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and AP style errors found in a representative sample of mainstream media and then label that level of performance as insufficient— a baseline that needs to be significantly surpassed in the standards of instruction and assessment practiced by J-schools. If, as the literature suggests, the current level of grammatical proficiency practiced by the media is unacceptable, then serious J-schools should identify that standard and deem it unacceptable for the work of their students. This research found that many J-schools consider writing that "could be published as is" to be "A" work. Perhaps they should not.

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